

The New York Times

January 27, 2010

A Bachelor's Effort to Understand Love

By JULIE SCELFO

IT was on the island of Saipan, in a remote part of the Pacific Rim, that John Bowe, then a 42-year-old writer researching a book on modern-day slavery, fell madly in love for the first time in his adult life.

The romance, which began three years ago, could have resulted in an engagement and maybe even marriage. Instead, it was the latest in a series of fraught relationships, all of which seemed destined to end in failure.

Mr. Bowe, a perpetual bachelor, had been in love twice before — in high school and as a graduate student — but it had been so long and this new feeling was so profound that it shook him to the core. Rather than making him happy, he said, it confused him.

"This facet of experience most people center their lives around came as this alien, funny, unanticipated shock to me," he said last week, pounding garlic and spices with a mortar and pestle in the kitchen of his West Village studio apartment. He was certain that he was in love, he said, but felt confounded by how to deal with a relationship that "came with so many complications, and a lot of fear, and a lot of pressure."

Part of the problem, he said, was the distance involved — Saipan is a two-day trip from New York — and the fact that the woman shared custody of her two sons with their father and couldn't leave the island.

So tormented was Mr. Bowe by his inability to make the relationship work that he set out on a two-year quest to find out why. Not through conventional means, like psychotherapy, but by researching other people's romantic experiences.

The result is "Us: Americans Talk About Love," a new collection of first-person accounts of why love succeeds or fails, published by Faber & Faber. No aspect of lust, greed, need or devotion is ignored: The book includes tales of obsession and confusion (from a 17-year-old girl in San Antonio, Tex., who can't get over an ex-boyfriend and a drug-addled 30-year-old living with his mother in Arizona while following his ex on Facebook); finding bliss (as a

44-year-old lesbian eventually did in Minneapolis, after more than a decade of marriage to a born-again Christian); and acceptance (from a 76-year-old widower in Manhattan who says he dated more than 300 women after his wife died, without ever finding anyone to take her place).

It is as compelling as literary fiction, and the Los Angeles Times Magazine called it a “profound, touching work.” But it also functions as a kind of self-help manual, forcing readers to examine their own longings, failings and assumptions about love.

On the surface, there is little to suggest that Mr. Bowe, who came to New York from Minneapolis in his early 20s “to be a famous musician or filmmaker,” isn’t the last great catch.

On a recent afternoon, he was well groomed and neatly dressed in a pressed oxford and jeans, his bright studio equally tidy: an assortment of cookware carefully arrayed on a kitchen wall, records and files stacked neatly under his bed. In the cotton-candy-colored bathroom, there was none of the hair or dust one might expect to see in a bachelor pad. And nearly every wall of his apartment was decorated with paintings of flowers, a collection he has spent more than two decades amassing.

“When I was a little punk rocker on a motorcycle when I was 18, I went to thrift stores, and I just noticed how many amateur paintings there are out there of either flowers or Jesus. I thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be cool to collect all the different ones?’ ” he said. “I realized I didn’t want 100 visages of Jesus staring down at me.”

Mr. Bowe’s domestication extends to cooking: even though it was the middle of the day, he had already begun preparing dinner — a pork dish with a homemade spice mix inspired by a jar of crushed sweet peppers brought back from a recent trip to Portugal. Offering his guest some mint tea, he reached into a cupboard and pulled out a bag full of dried mint leaves that he grew over the summer at a friend’s house in Dutchess County.

His résumé would impress any woman with a soft spot for social issues: After graduating from film school at Columbia University and co-writing the movie “Basquiat,” he traveled the world for a decade, working as a cowboy in Argentina and as a bargeman on the Amazon River. Along the way, he wrote a series of magazine articles on modern-day slavery — one of which won a Hillman prize for fostering social and economic justice — and later published a book called “Nobodies: Modern American Slave Labor and the Dark Side of the New Global Economy.”

Ask him about his work as a journalist and he holds forth like a modern-day Marxist, railing against injustice and criticizing the mainstream news media for focusing on the ruling class instead of “regular people.”

“I don’t like experts and authorities, and I don’t like writing about stuff in the normal way they consider news,” he said, explaining his belief that “noncelebrities” and “nonexperts” do a far better job of illuminating the human condition.

“Even thinking you’re the most enlightened, objective person in the world, you could never anticipate” all the points of view you get from ordinary people, he said. “And they end up being smarter than you could ever be.”

Despite his profound feeling for the problems of complete strangers, Mr. Bowe doesn’t seem to have as much awareness when it comes to the difficulties in his own life.

After repeated prodding, he recounted his romantic history, beginning with a high school relationship in which he and a girlfriend broke up and got back together “1,500 times.” During one of the separations, he said, he set her up with one of his best friends, which turned out to be an inspired pairing. (The two were still together when he went off to college.) Later, he said, he fell for a “deeply funny” film school classmate who was smart and creative. But during the year and a half they dated, they discovered that they were “awful at resolving problems.”

In his 30s — when he alternated between “long stretches of being alone” and “one-night stands or lame affairs,” he said — he was focused almost entirely on his career: “I wanted to put writing first, so I could earn a living doing it. I wanted to make sure I could do what I wanted to do.”

Once he fell in love with the woman in Saipan, though, he spent two years traveling back and forth while they hatched a plan for her move to New York. Eventually, it became clear that the plan was unrealistic. “You know that idea that true love conquers all?” he said. “It can conquer a hell of a lot, but it can’t conquer everything.”

As to why his previous relationships didn’t work out, either, he volunteered: “I can be oblivious. I don’t think I’m ever mean or whatever. But I think I can just be thoughtless sometimes. You can’t ever be thoughtful enough.”

What would the women he’s dated say?

"There's the impotency problem," he deadpanned. "That's a joke."

Pouring mint tea into two glasses, he explained that while he has no regrets about his past, he still wants nothing more than to fall in love and start a family. "At a certain point, one wants it all to stop, and just to settle down and be boring and normal," he said. "And that's absolutely who I've become now. I will be the happiest person on this planet when I have kids. I do think it's a bummer to be playing around with your kids in your 50s as opposed to in your 30s, but that's the way the cookie crumbled."

Later, in one of several late-night phone calls when Mr. Bowe seemed less guarded, he speculated about his chances of finding love at this point in his life. "I think it's a very arrogant gamble I made in a way," he said. "I'll have time to set up a career that fulfills my spiritual goals and then have time for a relationship afterwards. If I'm right, then I'm the coolest guy in the world. If I'm wrong, I'm a loser."

Over the years, he admitted, friends have accused him of being afraid of intimacy. "But pretty much all of those friends wanted to be artists or filmmakers or writers, and none of them are," he said.

"The goal was always to avoid being that surly alcoholic guy who didn't live up to his dreams and blamed the wife and kids for that," he added. "So, you make your calculations, you roll the dice and you hope you're right that there's time after you make it to then join the human race and have a normal emotional life."

Illustration for audio player courtesy of Joanna Neborsky.